

# The Poetry of Timothy Steele

*The Tennessee Quarterly* (Winter 1996)

KEVIN WALZER

In 1979, free verse had been the unchallenged, orthodox style in American poetry for two decades, and for most of the preceding six decades. The modes of free verse had varied from imagist to deep image, from confessional to conversational but poets insisted on devising their own formal rules, rather than following a predetermined form. In this environment, Timothy Steele's first book, *Uncertainties and Rest*, was published.

Steele's book was more than anomalous. In a milieu that most often featured poets speaking casually about some aspect of their life or interest in short-lined, imagistic free verse, Steele instead featured poem after poem in various structures of meter and rhyme. Some talked about (presumably) the author's life, but others were discursive, even essayistic investigations of abstract topics, dramatic monologue, and even epigrams and light verse. In fact, they featured an impressive range of subjects, tones, and forms. Yet with the exception of one poem in a loosely accentual line, none of the poems was in free verse.

Steele's work has varied little since. In fact, of all the poets associated with the Expansive school—the group of poets devoted to restoring traditional form and narrative to contemporary American poetry, and which *Uncertainties and Rest* helped inaugurate—perhaps none more exemplifies the "traditional form" aspect of the movement than Steele. After a recent flurry of publication—his third book, *The Color Wheel*, was released by Johns Hopkins in 1994, while Arkansas reissued his first two books in 1995—it is possible, and useful, to take a long view of Steele's career and his relationship to literary tradition.

Steele is traditional in several senses. First, he is traditional in his choice of forms: all three of his books are written mostly in various metrical and rhyme schemes, and in a plain language that descends from Ben Jonson

## The Poetry of Timothy Steele

and John Dryden to Robert Frost and Yvor Winters in the twentieth century. Second, he is traditional in his approach to his subject: he presents his ideas and emotions directly, clearly, and logically, in a manner that can be easily paraphrased, usually without the indirection, allusiveness and irony that characterizes much contemporary poetry. And third, he is traditional in his method: he writes poems about a variety of subjects that engage his interest, and though larger themes can be discerned in his work, he does not obsessively chase one or two subjects, as do many contemporary poets. Moreover, he champions his aesthetic approaches as a critic.

To describe Steele in these terms is not to present an indictment, but to outline the degree to which his work has differed from the mainstream of twentieth-century American poetry. He is not unique, but unusual enough to merit attention for his differences from the mainstream. His achievement as a poet, however, is such that he differs from the mainstream far less today than when he began writing—an important marker of the range and substance of his influence. In short, he has helped to change the course of the stream.

Steele's poetry is best described by a statement he makes in his critical book, *Missing Measures: Modern Poetry and the Revolt against Meter* (Arkansas, 1990):

What is most essential to human life and to its continuance remains a love of nature, an enthusiasm for justice, a readiness of good humor, a spontaneous susceptibility to beauty and joy, an interest in our past, a hope for our future and above all, a desire that others should have the opportunity and encouragement to share in those qualities. An art of measured speech nourishes these qualities in a way no other pursuit can. (294)

Though Steele intended this as a general statement, it reveals much about his own poetry; Steele's poetry is frequently about nature, finds beauty and joy where other might overlook them, maintains a steady, calm tone, and

## The Poetry of Timothy Steele

depicts these concerns in clear language cast in traditional modes.

As noted, Steele's work first began appearing in the 1970s, and Steele was 31 when *Uncertainties and Rest*, was published. Though the book is an accomplished one, its title suggests that *Uncertainties and Rest* is a young man's book; the poems wrestle with uncertainties and alienation, searching for rest and security. Several of the poems depict tones of alienation and despair, as does "**Baker Beach at Sunset**," revised when it was re-issued:

**JULY 4, 1976**

This is a place the ocean comes to die,  
A small beach backed by trashcans and concrete.  
Bits of torn paper scrape the sand; the sky  
Supports a few gulls. Words seem obsolete

In settings such as these. The salt gusts blow  
The scent of marijuana up our way.  
No bathers in these tides, and, yes, I know  
I've written nothing in three months. Friends say

That there's still gold in modernist motifs—  
But I've learned what too much self-scrutiny  
Does to the spirit. Secondhand beliefs,  
The palpitating soul: how carefully

We shelter and array these. Two jets fade  
West of the low sun, and the Golden Gate  
Shines with a kind of neo-gothic pride,  
A bright memorial of the welfare state.

Seaward, tugboats and freighters lead and bear  
The commerce of the Far East and Marin;  
But gulls shriek at a distance, as if aware  
Of the grim age the tide is bringing in. (76)

In its form, this poem is characteristic of Steele's work: rhymed quatrains, an iambic pentameter line. But its world-weary, alienated tone—both blunt

## The Poetry of Timothy Steele

and obscure—is anomalous in Steele's body of work, and makes the poem a particularly interesting one in Steele's development in the way it confronts the issues of tradition, literary and otherwise. The poem's speaker walks a trashy beach alone, in despair, on the Bicentennial. Yet the poem does not turn to issues of American history, but the speaker's own sense of failure as a writer: "yes, I know/I've written nothing in three months." The speaker considers what his friends tell him—"there's still gold in those modernist motifs"—but claims to reject them because of the corrosive effect of self-scrutiny on the spirit. The poem, though, is ambivalent about those "modernist motifs." While it claims to reject them, it also exploits them: the poem is all mood and implicit idea, ending on a harsh note of despair while resolving little. Steele more typically works his poems to a clear conclusion, in which ideas rise cleanly from the scenes he depicts.

Another poem, "**Last Night as You Slept**," counterpoints the alienation of "Baker Beach at Sunset" with the sense of peace the collection seeks:

The clock's dial a luminous two-ten,  
Its faint glow on pillow and sheet,  
I woke—and the good fatigue and heat  
We'd shared were gone; and I, sensing again

Distance as chill as the light on the shades,  
Was so uncertain, love, of our rest  
That I woke you almost as I drew my chest  
Against the warm wings of your shoulder blades. (79)

This poem is more characteristic of Steele's work in its tone—the intimacy that is so essential to love poems (and Steele is an outstanding love poet)—and in the way it finds great resonance in a simple, everyday scene, without straining language to assert the resonance. Although "Last Night as You Slept" is a simple poem, its gracefulness is not a simple achievement.

During the seven years between *Uncertainties and Rest* and *Sapphics against*

## The Poetry of Timothy Steele

*Anger* (1986), Steele's work underwent a subtle maturation. As noted, he was already accomplished formally when his first book was published, but he left behind the youthful alienation that was so prevalent in *Uncertainties and Rest*. In fact, *Sapphics against Anger*, to a degree, critiques the restless passion of the poems in the earlier book. The collection's title poem, "**Sapphics against Anger**" is a case in point:

Angered, may I be near a glass of water;  
May my first impulse be to think of Silence,  
Its deities (who are they? do, in fact, they  
Exist? etc.).

May I recall what Aristotle says of  
The subject: to give vent to rage is not to  
Release it but to be increasingly prone  
To its incursions.

May I imagine being in the *Inferno*,  
Hearing it asked: "Virgilio mio, who's  
That sulking with Achilles there?" and hearing  
Virgil say: "Dante,

That fellow, at the slightest provocation  
Slammed phone receivers down, and waved his arms like  
A madman. What Atilla did to Europe,  
What Genghis Khan did

To Asia, that poor dope did to his marriage."  
May I, that is, put learning to good purpose,  
Mindful that melancholy is a sin, though  
Stylish at present.

Better than rage is the post-dinner quiet,  
The sink's warm turbulence, the streaming platters,  
The suds rehearsing down the drain in spirals  
In the last rinsing.

## The Poetry of Timothy Steele

For what is, after all, the good life save that  
Conducted thoughtfully, and what is passion  
If not the holiest of powers, sustaining  
Only if mastered. (12)

In his important early essay on Expansive poetry, "Reading the New Formalists," Robert McPhillips speaks of Steele's "distinctly neoclassic sensibility which enables him to write clearly on any number of subjects" (311-312). "Sapphics against Anger" is a particularly good example of that sensibility at work. Steele uses a classical Greek form, the sapphic (organized by syllable count), and a classical poetic mode, the verse essay, to address a subject at once contemporary and ancient: anger and its effects on human relationships. Like a prose essay, the poem addresses the abstract idea of anger, bringing in specific examples to support its points (though it does so more lyrically than a prose essay, as in the graceful image of "the suds rehearsing down the drain in spirals/ In the last rinsing"); Steele argues that anger, needlessly vented, can destroy relationships, and that the passion that fuels anger is "sustaining/ Only if mastered." The poem's rueful assertion that "melancholy is a sin, though/ Stylish at present" represents the shift in Steele's work from his first book to his second.

Perhaps the strongest poem in *Sapphics against Anger* is "**Near Olympic**," a long exploration of a mixed west Los Angeles neighborhood. Written in rhymed couplets, Steele's portrait of that landscape and the people who inhabit it is affectionate and detailed, bristling with observation:

The neighborhood, part Japanese and part  
Chicano, wears its poverty like art  
Exotic in its motley oddities.  
Over dirt driveways hang banana trees;  
In front of small square stucco houses bloom  
Broad jacarandas whose rain-washed perfume  
At morning half redeems the rush-hour released  
Swelled roaring off the freeway six blocks east.

## The Poetry of Timothy Steele

Along the street sit Fords and Oldsmobiles,  
Lowslung and ancient; or—with raised rear wheels  
And sides flame-painted—Mustangs and Chevilles.  
And in the courtyards of one-time motels  
In which the poorer families live, there grow  
Sweet corn and yellow squash, and chickens go  
Jerkily here and there, loud squawkings borne  
Through limp, arched iris leaves and stalks of corn. (20)

Most would likely describe this as a junky, impoverished landscape, but Steele finds surprising beauty in the mixture of human relics and struggling nature: car exhaust and jacaranda scents; rusted-out cars and gardens with livestock. The two are enmeshed in that particular place, giving it its distinctive character: a place in which survival, though a constant struggle, is achieved, and sometimes something greater than mere survival emerges. That character is also manifested in the people who live in the neighborhood, as Steele demonstrates:

This is the hour of casual casualties.  
Birds clatter in the stiff fronds of palm trees,  
The bustle that the twilight's always fed.  
The mother strokes her daughter's jet black head;  
The child makes choppy trooper steps toward the walk.  
Some older children bike along the block,  
A girl there crying, *No one catches me*,  
Glancing back quickly, pumping furiously  
Off from the others. Bent to handlebars,  
Only one boy pursues her. Past parked cars,  
It's *No one catches me*, and nearly night.  
No eyes are following the girl's delight—  
At least not Carlos's or the young mother's.  
Nor do their eyes meet, ever, one another's.  
It is as if they do not see or hear.  
The mother will be nineteen come next year,  
And Carlos twenty. What they are survives

## The Poetry of Timothy Steele

The limpid vacancies of air, their lives  
Now like some urgent, unobtrusive thing,  
Withdrawn and lovely and diminishing. (15-16)

The young girl who rides her bike and screams *No one catches me!* is filled with spirit, and has not yet met the defeat that others of the neighborhood have encountered, such as the father and mother; not even twenty, both are already grim and pessimistic, not even able to share joy in raising their daughter. Perhaps they know better than the girl who thinks no one will catch her; they have been caught. Yet the small beauties that persist in the neighborhood—the jacaranda scents, the "limpid vacancies of air," the young girl's fearlessness—do not seem entirely threatened, even as they are "withdrawn and lovely and diminishing." Steele finds some hope in the scene that survival will continue, however difficult that may be.

"Near Olympic" brings together two significant tendencies in Steele's work: observation of the natural world and of human character. His interest in both has been apparent from the start, but he has deepened his vision with each successive book, even as his tone has settled: "He is particularly even-tempered on all occasions," McPhillips writes (314).

That deepening is clearly evident in his most recent book, *The Color Wheel*. "**Portrait of the Artist as a Young Child**" is a good example:

Your favorite crayon is Midnight Blue  
(Hurrah for dark dramatic skies!)  
Though inwardly it makes you drone  
To see it like an ice-cream cone  
Shrink with too zealous exercise.

But soon you're offering for review  
Sheets where Magenta flowers blaze.  
And here's a field whose mass and weight  
Incontrovertibly indicate  
You're in your Burnt Sienna phase.

## The Poetry of Timothy Steele

Long may you study color, pore  
Over Maroon, Peach, Pine Green, Teal.  
I think of my astonishment  
When first I saw the spectrum bent  
Around into a color wheel,

A disc of white there at the core,  
The outer colors vivid, wild.  
Red, with its long wavelengths, met  
With much-refracted violet,  
And all with all were reconciled.

When I look past you now, I see  
The winter amaryllis bloom  
Above its terra-cotta pot  
Whose earthen orange-apricot  
Lends warmth to the entire room.

And cherry and mahogany  
Introduce tones of brown and plum;  
While by the hearth a basket holds  
Balls of yarn-purples, greens and golds  
That you may wear in years to come.

Yet for the moment you dispense  
Color yourself. Again you kneel:  
Your left hand spread out, holding still  
The paper you'll with fervor fill,  
You're off and traveling through the wheel

Of contrasts and of complements,  
Where every shade divides and blends,  
Where you find those that you prefer,  
Where being is not linear,  
But bright and deep, and never ends. (32-33)

In this poem, Steele combines nature and human nature through a close

## The Poetry of Timothy Steele

observation of a child's first experience with crayons. The poem depicts the child's wonder in re-creating the world's color with crayons, and the speaker recalls his own experience at seeing an actual color wheel—a beam of light broken into its full spectrum of visible color. In a spectrum of light, each band of color modulates inseparably into the next, and neat divisions are impossible; all are interconnected. Turning his attention back to the present, the speaker sees similar connections between colors in the child's room, and connects the child's wonder to that interconnectedness: "Where being is not linear/ But bright and deep, and never ends." It is a precious place, too easily lost.

**"December in Los Angeles"** is another example of how Steele observes the intersections of nature and human nature, and also exemplifies the shift in his perspective that has occurred since his earliest book:

The tulip bulbs rest darkly in the fridge  
To get the winter they can't get outside;  
The drought and warm winds alter and abridge  
The season till it almost seems denied.

A bright road-running scrub jay plies his bill,  
While searching through the garden like a sleuth  
For peanuts that he's buried in the soil:  
How different from the winters of my youth.

Back in Vermont, we'd dress on furnace vents.  
A breakfast of hot cereal—and then  
We'd forge out to a climate so intense  
It would have daunted Scott and Amundsen.

I'd race down icy Howard Street to catch  
The school bus and pursue it, as it roared  
Up Union, my arms waving, pleading, much  
To the amusement of my friends on board.

But here I look out on a garden, whose

## The Poetry of Timothy Steele

Poor flowers are knocked over on their side.  
Well, stakes and ties will cure them of the blues  
(If not the winds) and see them rectified.

And in the shower is a pail we use  
To catch and save the water while it warms:  
I fetch and pour it on the irises  
And hope this winter will bring drenching storms. (52-53)

This poem notes the contrast between the adult speaker's present balmy winter and the chilly winters of his youth. The speaker recalls his racing to catch the school bus on an icy street with amusement and affection, yet without undue nostalgia; he treats his present environment, Los Angeles, with as much tenderness as he does the past, hoping to bring forth beauty in the flowers. In this poem, observation of the natural environment blends with memory to paint a warm picture of human interaction with place.

It should be fairly clear that Steele's poetry does not just differ from the modernist-influenced mainstream of contemporary poetry; it is largely a repudiation of that mainstream. As McPhillips notes: "He writes as if the modernist movement had never occurred" (314). Steele, though, is well aware that the modernist movement occurred, and in *Missing Measures*, he devotes considerable effort to critiquing modernism and its aftermath. In fact, *Missing Measures* is one of the seminal critical texts of Expansive poetry. The book is a comprehensive analysis of the modernist free verse revolution, examining in meticulous detail the assumptions of the modernist poets—particularly Eliot, Pound and Williams—in their experimentation with free verse, and the unintended consequences of that experimentation.

Steele suggests that the key assumption of the modernists—an erroneous one, he argues—is their identification of the stilted formalism of late Victorian poetry with meter itself, and their conclusion that to renovate poetry required abandoning meter. This is a radical step compared to the earlier innovators that T.S. Eliot often compared the modernists to; the

## The Poetry of Timothy Steele

Romantic and, before them, Augustan poets altered poetry's subject matter and diction but did not reject meter itself. "[The modernists] believed that in order to get rid of Victorian style they also had to get rid of meter, which of course had been employed by the Victorians but was not specifically Victorian, having been used by centuries of earlier poets" (6-7)

The modernists rejected meter for several reasons, Steele suggests. One reason is related to the modernists' cultural anxiety over the status of verse, which by the nineteenth century had lost its status as the primary art to prose, a significant shift. He notes: "Much of the history of prose style concerns efforts to make prose as memorable and as attractive as verse and to secure for prose a quasi-metrical integrity so that it can achieve an emotional power comparable to poetry" (9). The modernists took the opposite view: "Whereas in earlier times prose writers experimented with incorporating verse cadences into prose, poets now began to experiment with integrating the relative rhythms of prose into verse. Prose becomes, in short, the primary art. In this context, Ford Madox Ford and Ezra Pound's assertion that, as Ford puts it, 'verse must be at least as well written as prose if it is to be poetry,' gets transmuted into the notion that verse might profitably be written as the novel is written—without meter" (9).

The reason the modernists felt they could write poetry without meter descends from an ancient philosophical confusion over the definition of poetry. Steele identifies a conflation by Renaissance philosophers of Aristotle's *Poetics* with Quintilian's *Institutes of Oratory*, which drew a distinction between poetry (in the Renaissance, writing that especially and intensely imitates nature) and verse (writing in meter). Though the contexts of this distinction changed over the centuries, the distinction itself remained, and the modernists frequently made use of it in their essays. In modernist theory and practice, Steele notes, the idea "that poetry is something *more* than meter is transformed into the idea that poetry is something *other* than meter. One finds in much modern criticism, especially in that of Eliot, the belief that conventional metrical composition is less admirable than poetry which eschews regular meter in preference for some

## The Poetry of Timothy Steele

more 'difficult' quality of rhythm" (10).

Another factor in the modernists' sense of poetic purity is nineteenth century aestheticism, its emphasis on formal purity, and its notions of organic form. Aestheticism—the "art for art's sake" movement with roots in Kant's *Critique of Judgment*—treated works of art as autonomous, unified creations, whose qualities were judged only through a response to the work itself, and not by extrinsic standards. Steele notes, "If every poem is defined in terms of an independent internal unity, it follows that every poem may or even should create its own prosody" rather than follow a fixed, predetermined form (11). Accompanying an artistic emphasis on purity is an elevation of music—the most purely formal, non-referential form of art—to the top of artistic hierarchy, reflected in Pound's command that poets should "compose in the sequence of the musical phrase, not in sequence of a metronome." This command focuses on the broad category rather than the more narrow category of fixed metrical measure, and not only allows free verse, but privileges it as the more "pure" formal practice (12).

Buttressing this elevation of free verse's formal purity over traditional form is a shift in poets' understanding of the phrase "organic form," a term that parallels aesthetic practice with the natural world. In the Romantic period, poets saw no contradiction between nature and meter since, in their view, nature proceeded according to fixed principles of development. By the turn of the century, though, poets' definition of "organic form" had changed:

Rather than urging that poets should create, as nature does, according to certain regulating principles of development, some observers contend that poets should function, as nature functions, unconsciously. And rather than imitating the comeliness of natural objects, some poets, such as D.H. Lawrence, seek to suggest the internal processes that determine those objects. To the extent that these processes are regarded as being elementally turbulent or chaotic, verse that is intentionally confused comes to be considered truer to nature than is verse of a more orderly kind. To the extent

## The Poetry of Timothy Steele

that metrical speech embodies clear structural principles, it is therefore discouraged as not only unnecessary to poetical-natural truth but inappropriate to it. (12)

This shift in definition of organic form parallels scientific developments in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—particularly those of Darwin, Freud and Einstein—and leads to what Steele identifies as the final factor in the free verse revolution, the influence of science on poets.

Scientific discourse exerted great influence on the modernist poets. Although they were in certain senses deeply rooted in tradition—the range of reference in *The Waste Land* and *The Cantos*, as well as Eliot's essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent," proves this point—the modernist poets also saw themselves as innovators in the same sense as Darwin, Freud and others, innovators whose ideas radically changed the world in which they lived. In their view, relentless experimentation—constantly introducing new ideas and forms that would subsume earlier ones, or render them obsolete—was the only way to write genuine poetry in the modern world: "The modern's leaders transferred to poetry this model of scientific history. This transferral undermined the older view that, in poetic composition, the safest guides are provided by the examples of earlier masterpieces. In addition, the transferral encouraged the notion that the literary past is, like the scientific past, largely irrelevant to present practice" (14).

Steele's response to this conclusion is one of frank despair. He is worth quoting at length:

What happened was different from what the leaders of the modern movement anticipated. Their revolution triumphed. But a new metric did not emerge. And the inheritors of the legacy of the modern movement, their numbers growing from decade to decade, simply went on writing without meter. The interim period was repeatedly and indefinitely extended. Originally a means of examining the old measures or of testing whether new measures were possible, free

## The Poetry of Timothy Steele

verse itself became a "form." Whereas the early experimentalists had pursued heterodox versification in the interests of poetic purity, their followers employed such procedures in an increasingly casual fashion, the revolution having undermined the metrical tradition and metrical awareness that gave the procedures significance in the first place.

Today, one almost hesitates to say that most poets write unmetrically: such a statement suggests that they know what meter is, which does not appear to be the case. Rather, it seems that versification, as it has been understood for millennia, is for the majority of contemporary poets an irrelevant matter. And looking back across our century, one may feel that metrical tradition resembles a signal which has been growing fainter and fainter. (280-281)

Taken as a factual description of twentieth-century poetic practice, Steele's conclusion is indisputable. Free verse is the lingua franca of twentieth century American poetry, the dominant form. Although Steele cites brief revivals of traditional form in the 1950s, and distinguished work in traditional forms by individual poets throughout the century, these exceptions prove the rule of free verse.

Steele's entire project, as both poet and critic, seems to be to overturn the rule of free verse, or at least cut back its hegemony. Unlike most of the Expansive poets, Steele has only published a few poems in free verse. And his poems show little of the influence of free verse that other Expansive poets, such as Molly Peacock, display. He is devoted to demonstrating the viability and vitality of traditional form in the contemporary age, and in doing so, critiquing, even combating, the age's received form (the once) avant-garde practice of free verse. As both poet and critic, Steele is a traditionalist's traditionalist.

One reasonable objection to Steele's ideas is that, like it or not, free verse is deeply entrenched in literary tradition; at this point in history, it *is* a literary tradition, one that any accurate literary history must contend with.

## The Poetry of Timothy Steele

Although *Missing Measures* does contend with this tradition with meticulous scholarship, it also battles against it with polemic force. Steele is not only reporting literary history, he is attempting to change its future course. Certainly that is a legitimate aim of any historical scholarship: to show the relevance of the past to the present, and therefore future. And, as noted, Steele's conclusions are indisputable: the tide of free verse has swept away most of the flora and fauna of traditional forms. The recent resurgence of traditional form in the work of the Expansive poets (of whom Steele is one of the leading members) cannot change that fact.

One may ask, though, whether traditional form must be opposed with free verse so radically. In *Missing Measures*, Steele does not allow that the best free verse can partake deeply of traditional forms: Annie Finch's recent book *The Ghost of Meter* is a detailed exploration of the way that poets such as Whitman, Dickinson, Stephen Crane and Eliot engage metrical traditions in their free verse. And Finch does not focus on Pound, whose blending of different prosodies—Anglo-Saxon, Greek and Provençal, among others—came closest to establishing the new measure that the modernists sought. As Donald Hall, a distinguished practitioner of both traditional form and free verse, argues:

Although he was not innovative as an iambic poet, on the whole Pound's ear is the most inventive in modern literature. With "Cathay" he invented the lyric flatness developed by Rexroth, Snyder, Bly and Wright; powered by an illusion of simplicity, this sound (which is also a diction) erects itself as plain, clear, lucid; and stylelessness is always a style. Along with "Cathay" Pound developed the related note of Imagism, and the free-verse epigram-noise of the *Blast* poems; his flat sarcasm can contain or transmit social notes, literary judgments, cultural observations, moral outrage, and erotic feelings. In his Propertius Pound invented a discursive narrative noise which can fly to lyric touchstone-lines and accommodate narrative or reflective passages together. Useful to the *Cantos*, this sound accommodates and includes can turn ironic *or* ecstatic, lyric *or* narrative without altering itself to the point of indecorum. By the time of Propertius

## The Poetry of Timothy Steele

and Mauberly, Pound's sounds can move with swift sureness from tones at one end of the scale to the other. (114)

Although Pound's place in literary history remains a deeply troubled one, Hall is correct on this point: Pound was a superb prosodist, deeply indebted to various metrical traditions even as he rebelled against them.

Apart from the fact that good free verse cannot escape traditional forms, it is also worth considering that the free verse revolution is part of a historical continuum. Critiquing *Missing Measures*, Vernon Shetley argues that "prosody evolves," and he situates free verse "within the general history of English metrical development, in which one might see the colloquial freedoms taken by Browning, the dissolution of accent in Tennyson, and Hardy's movement toward what even Steele refers to as a 'rhymed accentual verse' as stages toward the eventual step of more radical 'free' prosodies" (155). It would be wrong to make the development of free verse a historical inevitability (particularly given the historical precedent of Hebrew poetry, the earliest known free verse, or even the alliterative-accentual prosody of Old English poetry, which, by ignoring syllable count, is "freer" than iambic pentameter). Within limits, though, Shetley's argument makes sense. Although the modernists were extreme in throwing meter out with the Victorian bathwater, there is a certain logical progression from Tennyson and Browning to Eliot and Pound and Williams to Olson, Creeley, Snyder, Levertov, and Bly. If one substitutes Whitman and Emerson for Tennyson and Browning, the lineage becomes even clearer.

Therefore: free verse's relationship to literary tradition is more complex than Steele allows. This oversimplification, though, is essential to his argument, and qualifying these issues about free verse does not diminish his fundamental point: that free verse, once a vigorous experiment that sought to renovate traditional prosody, has itself become a conservative, received form that in current practice seldom engages with the traditional prosodies that gave it birth and give it vitality. Restoring traditional prosodies is, at this point in literary history, a necessary task. And, as both

## The Poetry of Timothy Steele

poet and critic, no one has done more in that task than Steele.

It is a measure of Steele's impact that although he seems a staunch conservative on aesthetic issues even among the Expansive poets, the value, relevance and necessity of traditional prosodies for contemporary poetry seems indisputable.

Would critics be scrambling to connect free verse to traditional form without his example? It seems unlikely. Taken on his own terms, Steele is a substantial poet who has crafted a body of work that should, in some form, endure. He is as skillful a traditional poet as one could find, yet his poetry, in its subjects and themes, is distinctly of our time. Also, he is an erudite critic whose work has had a measurable impact on the literary climate of its time. The most traditional of traditionalists, Steele has shown that, for poets, there need be no conflict between the past and the present—an accomplishment that given the recent history of American poets, is as rare as it is welcome.

**WORKS CITED:** Finch, Annie. *The Ghost of Meter: Culture and Prosody in American Free Verse*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993. Hall, Donald. *Poetry and Ambition.. Essays 1982-1988*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1988. McPhillips, Robert. "Reading the New Formalists." *Poetry after Modernism*. Ed. Robert McDowell. Brownsville, Oregon: Story Line Press, 1991.300-328. Shetley, Vernon. *After the Death of Poetry. Poet and Audience in Contemporary America*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1993. Steele, Timothy. *The Color Wheel*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994. *Missing Measures: Modern Poetry and the Revolt against Meter*. Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1990. *Sapphics and Uncertainties: Poems 1970-1986*. Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1995.

This document is from <http://instructional1.calstatela.edu/tsteele/TSpag4/Walzer.html>. Last modified 08/01/13 for the Boulder Great Books August 7, 2013 discussion.

The poetry in this document is ©Copyright 2013 TIMOTHY STEELE.